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LEARNING ENGLISH THROUGH THE CLASSICS

(Concluded from page 17.)

I have now shown that the Greek language has merits which most other languages have not, and none in the same degree.

I have of set purpose confined this proof to the elements, to that which every one who learns Greek must learn and must continually practice: it appears to be highly useful that boys should be practiced every day in the art of saying exactly what they mean. But for those who advance further, the language has other shining merits, which I think no one will dispute. No language can express so many fine variations and shades of thought. Thus the student has to carry further the art of saying what he means. English has often one expression for two distinct thoughts: and when this is so, the two always come to be confused, and the untrained mind thinks that there is only one. For instance: "if I write" has not the same sense in the following:

- A. Why do you write?
- B. If I write, I have my reasons.
- A. Please give my kind regards.
- B. If I write, I will.

This is only one of a thousand examples. The enormous number of particles represent so many shades of feeling, that they can only be rendered by tone, gesture, movement of the face. There are scores of verbal inflections, each with its part to play. The learner is always learning new varieties of expression; few indeed learn all that can be learnt of the Greek language, and what it can do. If I do not dwell on this, it is because no one will deny it. My point is, that the process of making the thoughts clear, which we saw in the elements, is carried on to very high refinement by further study. This kind of training will be of great benefit to the ordinary mind: a great natural genius may do without this or any other training of the sort: but our schools are full of ordinary minds, not great natural geniuses.

But some one may say, these things are not quoted from English classics. One of them is: the rest are quite familiar English style, as all readers will agree. But further to meet the objection, I will take a few sentences from a good translation of a Greek classic, where the Greek has no style—it is

merely Greek—and the English is meant to have style. I open the book at random:

"Is the King designate to have such a force attached to his person as will enable him to enforce obedience upon unwilling subjects . . . Even upon the supposition that his authority is wholly constitutional". . . . (Welldon).

Πότερον ἔχειν δεῖ τὸν μέλλοντα βασιλεύειν ἰσχὺν τινα περὶ αὐτόν ἢ δυνήσεται βιάσθαι τοὺς μὴ πειθομένους πειθαρχεῖν; . . . εἰ γὰρ κατὰ νόμον εἴη κύριος (Aristotle, "Politics," iii, 15).

The Greek has only one abstract noun, "force": the English has five, of which two are foisted in without need ("person", "supposition"), one represents an action ("obedience"), one a descriptive word (κύριος). We are so used to these things, that a simple rendering would sound to most ears bald. My point as before is, not that English cannot be simple, but that it is not, and that Greek study may help to mend this. Things are still worse in metaphysics and other kinds of philosophy; where even in technical subjects Greek words always mean something: the very terms of grammar record to the student something of what goes on in the scholar's mind. Cicero, who invented most of the Latin terms of philosophy, cannot always be understood without Greek; but Plato, in his most abstruse parts, uses words which human beings could use in their daily life. It is thus that all arts and sciences seem to live when we read of them in Greek: in English, how dead they are; and how fearful is the jargon of books on plants, animals, the earth, Mendelism, pragmatism, and all the other isms and ologies. I have listened to a skilful coach teaching boys botany for an open scholarship: a large part of his work was to write on the board huge compounds in outward appearance Greek, which each described some harmless flower. The men of science so-called—I say so-called not to cast contempt on nature, but to protest that this word applies to knowledge of man's mind no less—who hate Greek like poison, use its dictionary to compound the most horrible simples. They are hoist with their own petard. Intoxicated with the exuberance of their own verbosity, they lose the power to speak as human beings, and not only fail to express any meaning they may have, but fall into fallacies of reasoning. I will quote here an instance, chosen because the reviewer in the *Athenæum* (1910, p. 737)

chose it for special praise, as a "specimen of argument":

"The whole species of giant armadillo having been destroyed by the sabre-toothed tiger, the latter's teeth formation rendered it impossible for him to prey on any animal. The sabre-toothed tiger thus found himself in pronounced and fatal physiological isolation, which is only one of the many startling symptoms of retribution arising from a dysteleological life".

I must first translate this into English, that you may see what it is meant for—not what it means: that we shall see later:

The sabre-toothed tiger had teeth so shaped that he could not eat anything but the giant armadillo. When he had eaten all the giant armadillos, there was nothing left for him to eat. Last of all, he died also. This is startling, but it often happens so, because nature punishes those creatures which—

I confess I cannot make out what the rest does mean, but I seem to see that the tiger's unpardonable sin was that he was a specialist. Men of science so-called err in the same way as their tiger, and when their sabre-teeth have devoured all those who have studied Greek and the art of saying what they mean, they will find themselves in pronounced and fatal physiological isolation, unless they have used the meanwhile to learn how one sabre-toothed tiger can eat another. It was unkind in the reviewer to choose this as a specimen of argument; for in the first sentence our author has not said what he means; he has said this: "Because all the armadillos were eaten, therefore the tiger's teeth were so formed that he could not eat anything else". And what is "pronounced isolation"? There is no reference in the argument to the pronunciation either of the tiger or of the armadillo. We are left to guess what word the tiger pronounced when he found that the armadillos were all done. "Physiological isolation" means, I suppose, that the tiger's teeth were so shaped that he could not eat anything now that there were no more armadillos: which has been said once already. And is it a symptom of retribution, or the retribution itself, that the tiger had to starve? As to "dysteleological", I give it up: but I guess that the tiger ought to have looked ahead, and got some other teeth ready for the time when the armadillos should be no more. That is a good moral, fit for serpent-toothed politicians as well as for sabre-toothed tigers; but I must say the blame here seems to lie with nature rather than the tiger. It was a mean sort of trick, a bad practical joke; startling, I agree, but the tiger could hardly help himself. The situation has its irony: if the tiger had known Greek he must have heard the proverb, "look to the end", and a precious life might have been saved.

If any one thinks that this is not a common style,

let him purchase Sir T. Clifford Allbutt's *Notes on the Composition of Scientific Papers* (Macmillan): a good half-crown's worth. Here speaks a distinguished man of science, whose words must carry weight: not a benighted classical man fighting in the last ditch to save his own skin.

This last sentence is not meant to imply that the present writer so describes himself. No: he is rather holding a crown of gold over the head of one who rakes in the muckheap. Greek is more precious than fine gold: Greek is wisdom, comfort, and delight. Its very dry bones, as some might call them, have been the subject of the foregoing words: even in these there has been shown to be profit for the humblest, the most stumbling learners.

CAMBRIDGE, ENGLAND.

W. H. D. ROUSE.

THE TEACHING OF LATIN PROSE COMPOSITION IN THE SECONDARY SCHOOL¹

A few months ago I received from the State Board of Public Education of Arkansas a communication beginning thus: "It is admitted that Latin Prose Composition, as at present taught, is a failure". The document then, in the fashion beloved of statistical educators, proceeded to invite answers to certain questions and comment upon certain suggestions. These ran from the entire elimination of the subject to restricting instruction therein to "a few weeks at the end of the term"—with results of either course of action identical. What the pupils did not need in x—5 weeks of the term, they certainly could not get in these remaining five. There was a great deal of local color in the whole communication: for, if I mistake not, it was in that same land of the cane-brake that a certain leaky roof didn't need repair in dry weather, and couldn't, of course, be repaired in wet.

In the very sweeping admission of this circular we cannot unite; but we may go so far as to admit that the teaching of Latin prose, and its results as well, may be improved.

As to the importance of the subject in the curriculum, it is refreshing to turn from deliverances like the above to a recent remark of Professor Kellogg: "We wield in Latin grammar and prose composition an implement as keen as mental arithmetic". But the trend of present-day pedagogy seems to be to attempt to serve mental nourishment in tabloid form, and deliberately to abandon keen implements wherewith our youth may carve real intellectual meat—as witness the fate of this same mental arithmetic. There seems to be an almost intentional catering to the wholly natural tendency of the young human animal toward idleness and sport, and to the wholly unnatural tendency on the part of parents to resign all responsibility for the education

¹This paper was read before The Classical Association of the Atlantic States at its Sixth Annual Meeting, at Philadelphia, May 4, 1912.